

TESTIMONY

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Testimony for the Western Congressional Caucus

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Thank you Chairman Pearce and Chairman Lummis. My name is Dan Gibbs, and I appreciate you and other members of the Congressional Western Caucus for having this field hearing in Colorado.

As a former Colorado state legislator who sponsored many state forest health and fire response legislation—many of which were adopted into law—and as a current Summit County Commissioner—a county that is experiencing major forest health concerns—and as a certified wildland firefighter who has fought fires throughout the west, I wanted to focus my remarks on the local and state concerns related to forest health and how Congress can help.

Summit County is experiencing major forest health concerns.

Over the last ten years, I've witnessed a transformation of our forest in the county that I live in and represent as well as the counties that I represented while serving as a Colorado State Senator. In Grand County, which is just north of Summit County and which gives rise to the headwaters of the Colorado River—a source of water and life for major cities and many western states—most of the lodgepole pine trees are dead. In Summit County alone, we have 146,000 acres of dead trees and about half of all of the pine trees are dead. These trees were killed by the mountain pine beetle epidemic that has been raging through Colorado and Wyoming forests.

As a result, we now have a major challenge to respond to these conditions and help the communities in places like Summit County and throughout the west address forest health and increased fire threats.

I appreciate that Congress has provided some assistance—primarily through the passage of the Healthy Forest Restoration Act (HFRA) in 2003. This law, which came as a response to major fires that occurred throughout the west in 2002 including the Hayman Fire in Colorado, which burned 138,000 acres, destroyed 133 homes, and resulted in \$40 million in suppression costs, has helped expedite forest restoration efforts. However, there is much more that can be done.

As can be seen from the Hayman Fire example—and many like it—the costs to suppress fires vastly outpaces the costs to treat forests to make them less prone to major fires. Although the Healthy Forest Restoration Act has been helpful in this regard, we need to expand upon it so that we can perform more treatment work and thus reduce the costs associated with suppression.

In Summit County, which is composed of over 80% national forest land, the portions of 146,000 acres of dead trees that are near communities need to be thinned or removed, or they will continue to present fire risks and threats to people when they eventually fall down. Some of these threats exist near homes and other important assets, such as watersheds and power lines. The challenge is in finding the resources to develop projects to thin and remove these trees, and to work within the existing legal and regulatory systems before we can go in and do the work.

As I mentioned, Summit County has benefitted from HFRA. In working with the U.S. Forest Service, we have treated 3,800 acres of dead trees in the wildland/urban interface. These projects did not occur until 2007, four years after its passage, but we were pleased that they were conducted. Currently, under HFRA, we have approximately an additional 12,000 acres of treatment projects approved for future work. However, we still have thousands of acres that need treatment in the wildland/urban interface. In short, although HFRA has helped a great deal, our needs in Summit County alone vastly outpace the assistance that this law provides.

As a result, Summit County has had to find additional resources.

In 2008, Summit County voters passed a measure, which authorizes a property tax levy for wildfire protection and the removal of bark beetle-killed trees, which could generate up to \$500,000 per year. In 2012, the County was able to apply this funding source for 12 projects on 140 acres of private land in the wildland/urban interface.

In addition, the Colorado Forest Restoration Act, a bill which I introduced and passed, established a grant program that made available \$1 million annually from state revenue for local wildfire mitigation and watershed protection. These funds are available for needs statewide, and grant applications far exceed the needs.

The Town of Dillon located within Summit County was a recipient of some of these grants that was used to treat the forested area along Straight Creek, a major drinking water supply. The town was rightly concerned that a fire in this area would greatly impact its watershed as well as Dillon Reservoir.

So, along with HFRA, the County's tax levy, and the statewide grant program, we have been able to get needed projects done. But, again, we still have thousands of acres to address in areas like Straight Creek and near homes.

That is why I'm interested in what more assistance Congress can provide.

Let me highlight a few concepts.

First, we need more funding. Plain and simple. The task of removing hazardous and fire-prone trees is daunting and state and local communities can only make a dent in this effort.

Second, we support allowing the USFS to designate “emergency” or “critical needs” areas and applying the streamlined HFRA provisions to these areas for immediate treatment. We would appreciate being consulted on this designation process.

Third, we strongly support the “Good Neighbor Authority,” which allows state foresters to perform essential treatment work on federal lands, and urge Congress to reauthorize this program, make it permanent and extend it to all states.

Fourth, we would support permanently reauthorizing “stewardship contracting” a mechanism that helps foster public-private partnerships.

Fifth, we urge Congress to support and foster forest health collaborative efforts. For example in Summit County, we currently have the Forest Health Task Force, Summit County Wildfire Council, and the Colorado Bark Beetle Cooperative all working with diverse community stakeholders to find common ground and complete projects.

Sixth, approximately 97% of wildfires in Colorado are contained at 100 acres or less, by local fire departments, 62% of which are all- volunteer. We need more support for training and equipment for local fire departments who are engaged with initial attack.

These recommendations would provide tangible and important assistance to reduce the emergency threat of large-scale wildfires and help promote a healthier, more sustainable forest.

CONCLUSION

We have undertaken vigorous efforts to mitigate the threat with limited resources through a number of unique collaborations between state and local government, private industry and landowners. Still, we are not able to address this forest health challenge adequately without further assistance.

The dire condition of our forests, the threats to our communities and resources-- especially water-- and the extreme drain on the federal treasury due to suppressing ever increasing wildfires, demands that Congress come together for the nation’s well-being.

Thank you.